

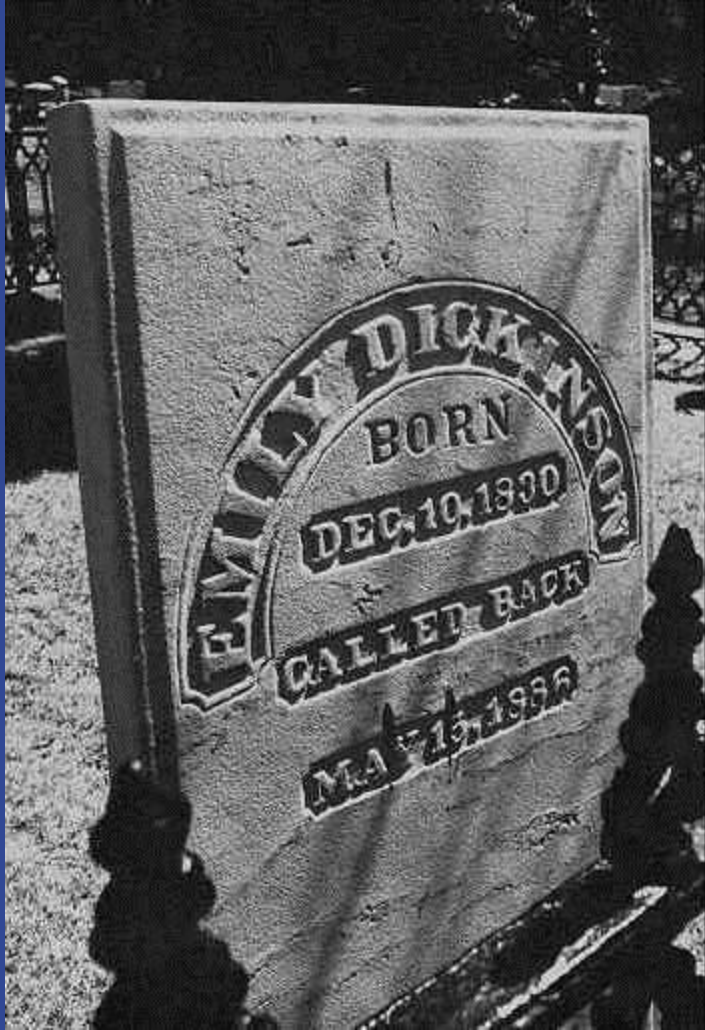
*dwell in
possibility...*

*emily
dickinson*

Overview of Dickinson's Life

“The Belle of
Amherst”

Unknown in her lifetime



- Now recognized as one of our greatest
- One of the greatest LYRIC poets of all time
- Critics try to use her life to explain her poetry
- Some say her poems are autobiographical

Were they?

Try Psychological Diagnoses

- “a helpless agoraphobic trapped in her father’s house” (psychologists)
- “last gasp of New England Puritanism”
- “victim of patriarchy by her father” (feminists)

And on and on . . .



How can they?

- 1700 poems
- Easy to find support for various theories
- Life, poems, and letters are often difficult to understand
- Often IMPOSSIBLE to understand



Dickinson's Life: Some Views

- Eccentric
- Psychologically unbalanced
- Crazy?



Wanted to Remain a Child

- Adopted “Emilie” as spelling for her name
- Letters to friends stated she wanted to remain a child
- Couldn't tell time until she was a teenager (said she didn't understand her father's explanation and didn't want him to know)
- Wore 100% white for almost her entire adult life



Patricia Lutz, director of the Amherst History Museum, stands in the museum's new exhibit, 'Emily Dickinson's Amherst,' next to a bicycle nicknamed a 'boneshaker.' At her left is Dickinson's sole surviving white dress. Above, an ornate fan made of black lacquered wood and silk stood in for air-conditioning during the period.

What About Her Love Life?

- Never married
- Are references to men in poems real?
- Or are the men and love imaginary?



The Reclusive Emily

- Increasingly reclusive in her 30s until she (almost) never left the house
- Behavior at family gatherings was “odd”
- “Would you like a glass of wine or a rose?”
- “She would sweep in, clad in immaculate white, pass through the rooms, silently curtsying and saluting right and left, and sweep out again.”



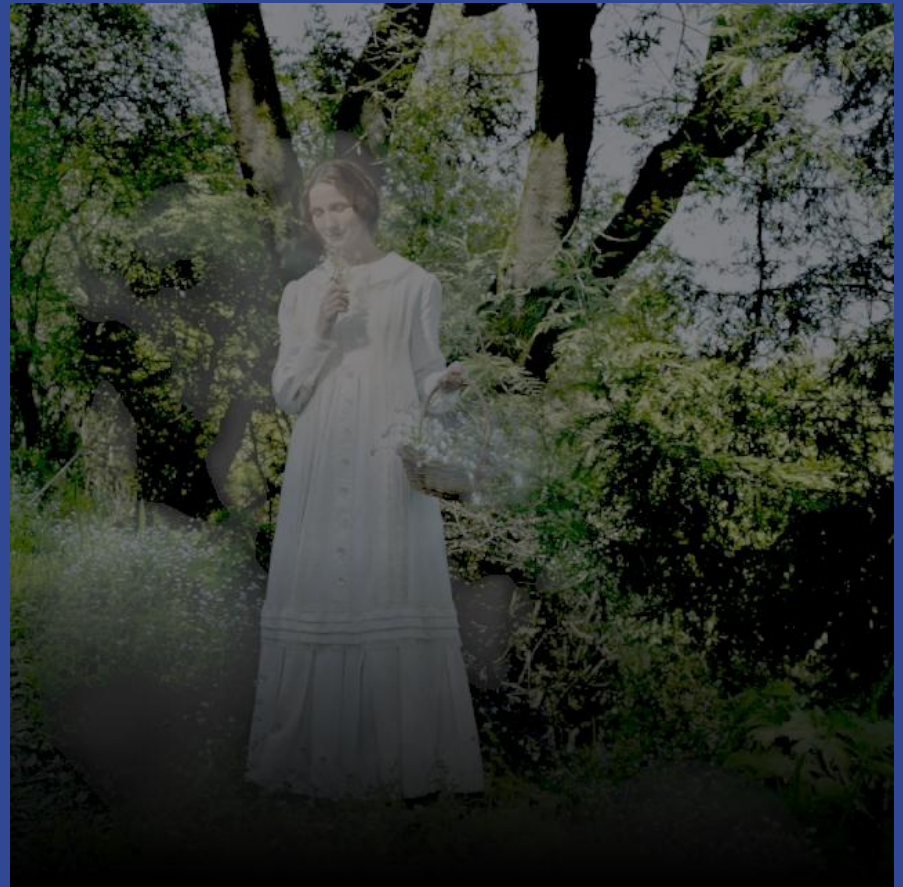
She Just Stayed In Her Room

- Would not even meet close friends
- Rushed away when strangers visited
- Talked with friends while hidden behind a partially open door
- Stayed in her room and listened to her father's funeral service (outside on the front lawn)
- Listened to a young woman play her piano, then sent note of appreciation



Even when ill?

- Including when dying she kept aloof
- Her doctor had to diagnose her as she walked by an open door



But was she cut off from PEOPLE?

- No
- She had an extensive correspondence
- Saw an occasional, special visitor
- Loved her brother's children
- Lowered baskets of baked goods via a pulley outside her window for neighborhood children

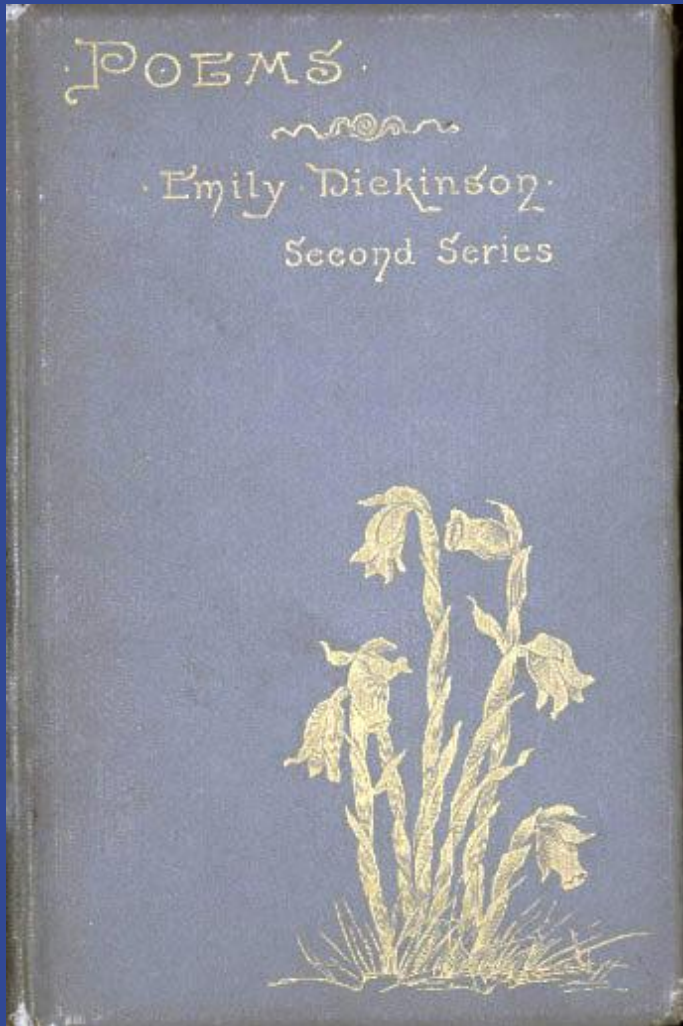


And what did she DO?

- Wrote poetry in her room
- Some critics believe that her withdrawal enabled her to write her poetry
- Gave her both the space to write and the time to write by freeing her from “woman’s duties”
- Not even her sister Lavinia knew the extent of her writing until after her death



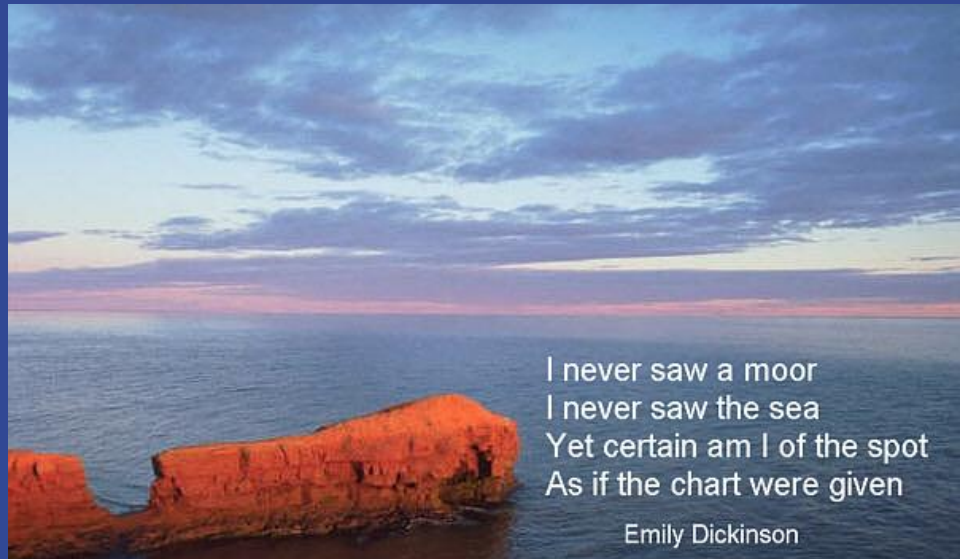
Dickinson's Poems



- Only a few poems published during her lifetime
- Some poems were unfinished; others were only rough drafts
- More than one draft exists of a number of poems
- She included poems in her letters, and changed them to suit her correspondent

General Observations

- Her occasionally idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation, and word choice can be distracting
- Editors have to decide whether to change her text to conform to modern usage



I never saw a moor
I never saw the sea
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given

Emily Dickinson

A Passionate Poet



- Even though she was secluded, she was a passionate poet
- She felt with her whole heart, thought with intensity, and imagined with ardor
 - “I find ecstasy in living, the mere sense of living is joy enough” (letter, 1870)
- Dickinson saw writing poetry as an exalted calling

Famous Definition of Poetry

- “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”



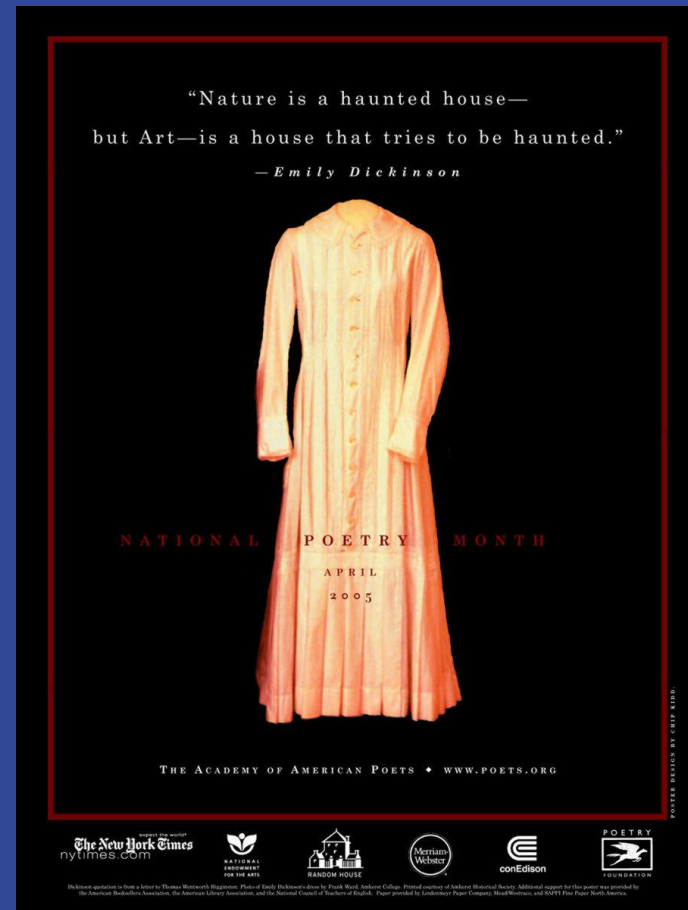
What Motivated Her to Write?

- Writing poetry may have been a release or an escape from pain
 - From deaths of loved ones
 - From her inability to resolve her doubts about God
 - From the terrors she saw within herself and in the world outside



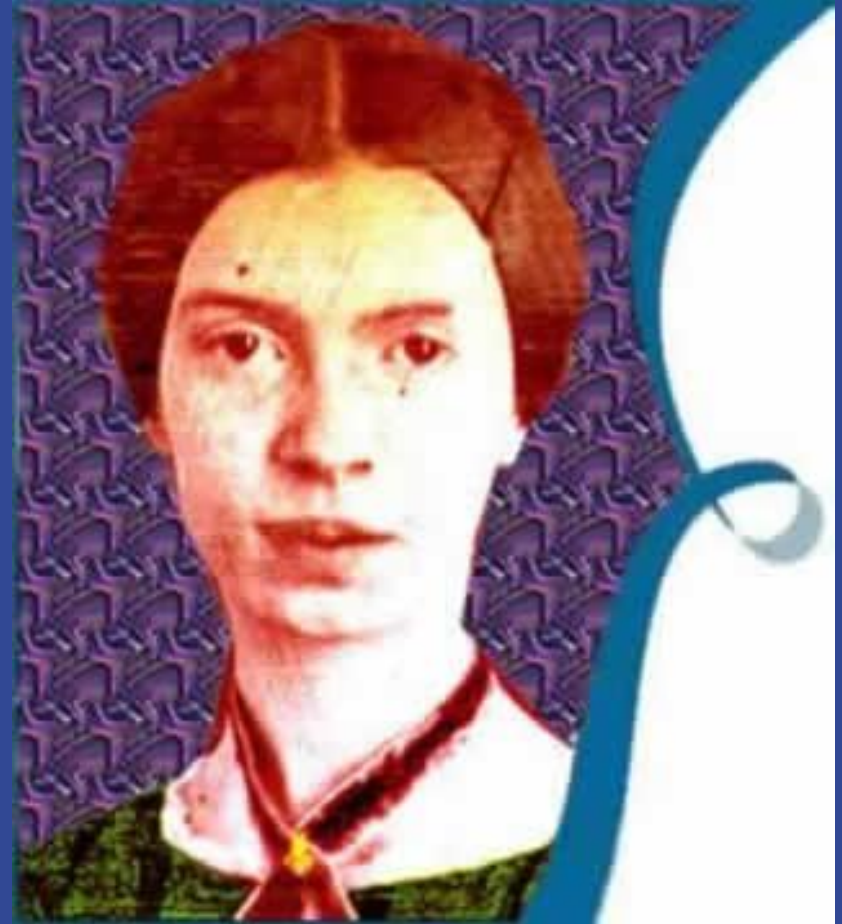
Dickinson's Personas

- In her poems, Dickinson adopts a variety of personas
 - A little girl
 - A Queen
 - A Bride
 - A Bridegroom
 - A Wife
 - A Nun
 - A Boy
 - A Bee



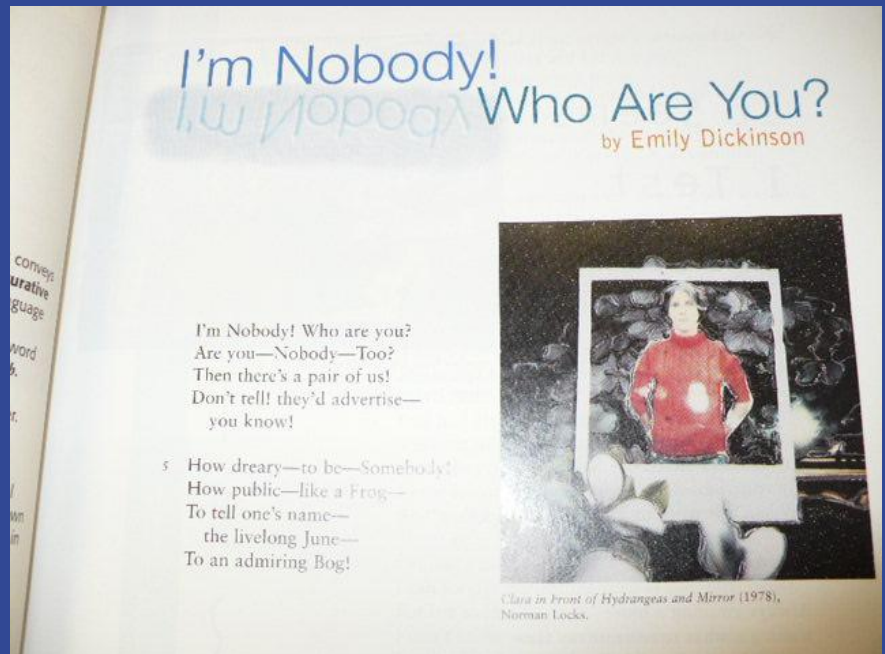
But Her Favorite Beginning?

- Nearly 150 of her pomes begin with “I”
- The Speaker is probably fictional
- The poem should not automatically be read as autobiographical
 - “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse, it does not mean – me – but a supposed person.”
-- Dickinson

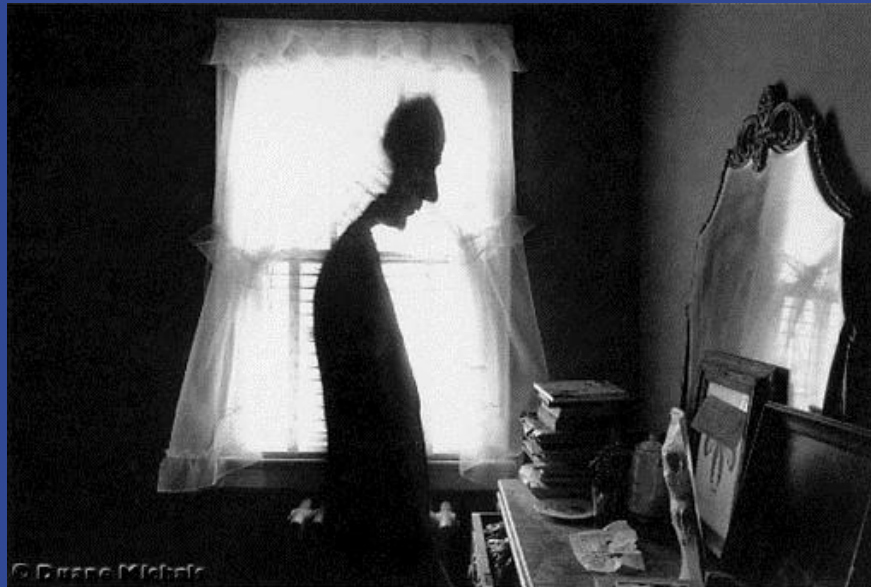


Dickinson's Style

- She distilled or eliminated inessential language and punctuation
- She leaves out helping verbs and connecting words
- She drops endings from verbs and nouns
- It is not always clear what her pronouns refer to
- She disregards rules of grammar and sentence structure



And then the downside . . .



- Her seclusion may have contributed to the obscurity of her poetry
- She seemed to create private meanings for words as well as private symbols which others do not have the key to
- Such language baffles the reader

Enamored of Language

- Dickinson enjoyed words for their own sake
- It amused her to read Webster's Dictionary (1844) and savor words
- This interest gives many of her poems their form:
 - “Pain has an element of blank”
 - “Renunciation is a piercing virtue”
 - “Hope is a thing with feathers”



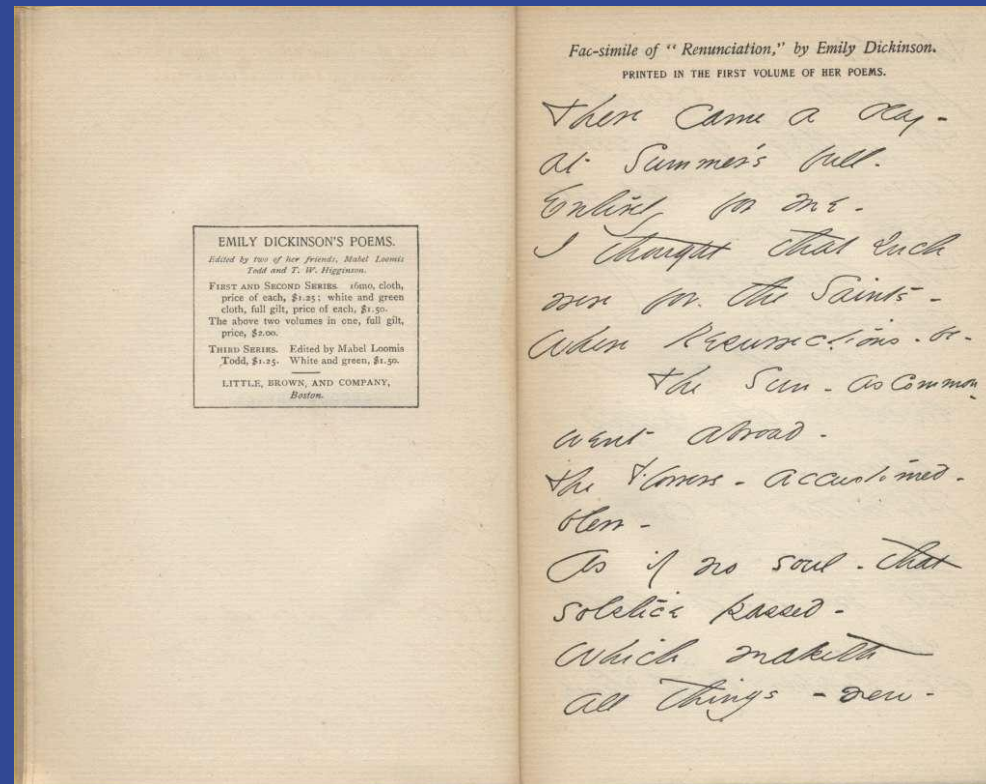
Look Carefully at Her First Lines



- Linguistic mastery and sense of dramatic combine in striking first lines of her poems
 - “Much Madness is divinest sense”
 - My life closed twice before its close”
 - “I felt a Funeral in my Brain”

Other Stylistic Characteristics

- Uses the dash
 - To emphasize
 - To indicate a missing word or words
 - To replace a comma or period
- Changes function of part of speech of a word
 - Adjectives and verbs may be used as nouns
- Uses be instead of is or are
- Tends to capitalize nouns for no apparent reason



What About Her Rhymes?

- To casual readers, it seems that Dickinson uses rhyme infrequently
- But, she does use rhyme, but forms of rhyme that were not generally accepted till late 19th century (and used by modern poets)
- Dickinson experimented with rhyme:
 - Identical rhyme (sane, insane)
 - Eye rhyme (though, through)
 - Vowel rhymes (see, buy)
 - Imperfect rhymes (time, thin)
 - Suspended rhyme (thing, along)



Dickinson's Themes

- Insights are profound, but limited in topic
- Northrup Frye:
 - “It would be hard to name another poet in the history of the English language with so little interest in social or political events.”
- Lived through the Civil War, yet poems contain no clear references to that national horror.
- Richard Howard:
 - “There was only one event, herself.”



The Inner World

- Presents a drama of individual consciousness
- Saw the potential danger and loneliness of the world: “The depths in every consciousness from which we cannot rescue ourselves – to which none can go with us” (letter, 1878).
- Adrienne Rich: “Dickinson is *the* American poet whose work consisted in exploring states of psychic extremity”
- And, “More than any other poet, Emily Dickinson seemed to tell me that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological, was inseparable from the universal.”

“There’s a certain slant of light”

“I felt a cleaving in my mind”

“I felt a funeral in my brain”



Death

- For Dickinson, the ultimate experience and the supreme touchstone
- Reveals ultimate truth or reality
- Makes clear the true nature of God and the state of the Soul
- Held the Puritan belief that the way a person died indicated the state of his/her soul – a peaceful death being a sign of grace and harmony with God



“I heard a fly buzz when I died”

**“Because I could not stop for
Death”**

“The bustle in a house”

Pain, Separation, and Ecstasy

- Pain plays a necessary role in human life
- Amount of pain we experience generally exceeds the joy
- Pain makes joy more vital
- Pain of loss or of lacking enhances our appreciation of victory, success, etc.
- Pain of separation indicates the degree of our desire for union (whether for human or for God)

“My life closed twice before its close”

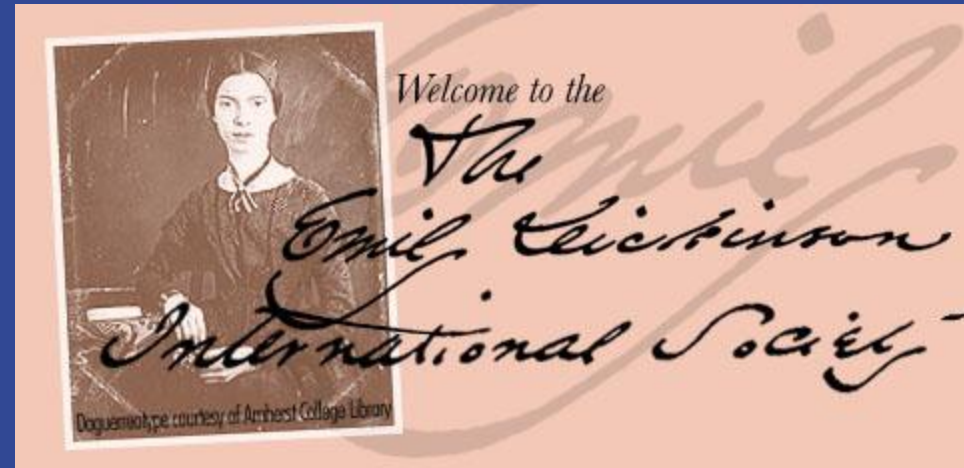
“Success is counted sweetest”

“I measure every grief I meet”



Love

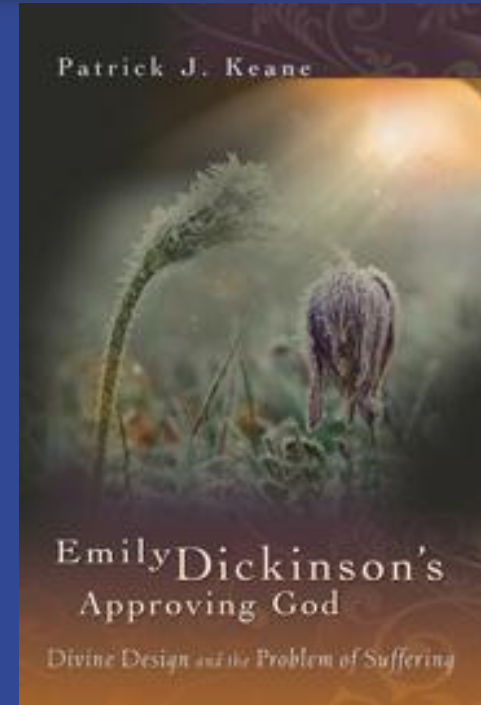
- George Whicher:
“Emily Dickinson was the only American poet of her century who treated the great lyric theme of love with entire candor and sincerity.” Poems run the gamut from renunciation to professions of love, to sexual passion; they are generally intense.



**“If you were coming in the fall”
“I cannot live without you”
“I early took my dog”
“Wild nights! Wild nights!”**

God and Religion

- Man's relationship to God and the nature of God concerned Dickinson throughout her life
- She came close to being converted once
- Never feeling "God's call" caused her considerable disquiet and pain
- Her attitude toward God in her poems ranges from friendliness to anger and bitterness, and He is at times indifferent, at other times cruel



“Apparently with no surprise”

**“Heaven is what I cannot
reach”**

“He fumbles at your Spirit”

Nature

- Nature is at times
 - Connected with death or with annihilation
 - Perceived as a regenerative – renewing – force
 - Characterized as indifferent to humanity



“A narrow fellow in the grass”

“A bird came down the walk”

“I never saw a Moor”

“I like to see it lap the miles”

“This is my letter to the World”

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature
told –
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet –
countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me

